

# *The Master Builder* from Folksong to Opera: The Adaptation of *The Bridge of Arta* by Nikos Kazantzakis and Manolis Kalomiris\*

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Manolis Kalomiris' opera *The Master Builder*, first performed in 1916, was adapted from Nikos Kazantzakis' play of the same name. Kazantzakis based his work on the Greek folksong in which, in order to complete a bridge, a master builder is ordered by a spirit to sacrifice his wife. Kazantzakis' protagonist is a Nietzschean hero, distracted by his love for his employer's daughter, Smaragda. While the play has features of ancient Greek tragedy, Kazantzakis suggests a contemporary relevance; his builders describe themselves as "the cranes which bring [...] the black swallows of the Springtime of the Mind".

In his libretto, aided by three poet friends, Kalomiris developed the lyrical element, but otherwise kept close to Kazantzakis' text. He removed some misogynistic expressions, and focused upon Smaragda's heroic devotion. Although Kalomiris dedicated his work, significantly, to Eleftherios Venizelos, whom he called "the Master Builder of Greater Greece", his opera, like Kazantzakis' play, transcends boundaries of time, place and cultural background.

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Nikos Kazantzakis' play *The Master Builder* (*Ο Πρωτομάστορας*), dated 1908, is one of his earliest works, and not one of his most famous.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is a fascinating play, not least because it develops themes to which he returned again and again in later life. Manolis Kalomiris' opera (or "musical tragedy", to use his own term) with the same title was based on Kazantzakis' play and was first performed in 1916. It gives a new dimension to Kazantzakis' work and was a landmark in Greek musical history.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this study — apart from making the play and opera better known to scholars and students — is ultimately to investigate the relation between the two. Kalomiris referred to his libretto as a στιχουργική διασκευή, an adaptation in verse, but what exactly did he mean by this? What are the features of the play that evidently appealed to Kalomiris? In what ways did he adapt Kazantzakis' text? How much of it did he preserve intact?

Kazantzakis' *The Master Builder* is based on the famous ballad of *The Bridge of Arta* (*Το γεφύρι της Άρτας*), of which over three hundred orally transmitted versions have been collected from many parts of the Greek world (see Megas, 1976). The song is associated with Arta because many versions refer to the fine old bridge which still stands just outside the town. Although versions differ widely in detail, the basic story is more or less common to all: in order for a bridge or some other building to be completed, a supernatural being (representing the spirit of the place or river) demands a human sacrifice. The victim is to be a woman, most often the wife of the master builder.

A well-known text of the song is the one published by Nikolaos Politis (1914). However, Politis' influential collection had not yet

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief introduction to *The Master Builder* see Bien, 1975 and Filias, 2000. In titles and quotations in Greek we have applied the modern accentuation system.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of Kalomiris' work as a whole in the context of Greek musical history, see Frangou-Psychopedi, 1990.

Manolis Kalomiris

Nikos Kazantzakis

appeared when Kazantzakis wrote his play. In addition to oral versions which he may have heard, Kazantzakis could have found it in various earlier publications, including the important collections of Greek folksongs edited by S. Zambelios in 1852 and A. Passow in 1860. Politis himself seems to have used Passow's text as his main source, adding some lines from other versions according to his usual practice. A summary of the remarkably dramatic version found in Passow and Zambelios is given for reference in Appendix I below.

Kazantzakis wrote *The Master Builder* while a postgraduate student in Paris in 1907–1909. He submitted it to a drama competition in Athens in 1910, and won first prize. It appeared the same year in the magazine *Παναθήναια* (*Panathineia*) under the pseudonym Petros Psiloritis, as well as in a separate edition (Kazantzakis, 1910).

Kazantzakis' *Master Builder* is divided into two acts, separated by a short Intermezzo. The first act is about twice as long as the second. The setting is the same throughout the play, an open space near the river with the bridge in the background, and there are no scene-divisions. The summary in Appendix II is intended not only to give a detailed

account of the play and opera, but also to indicate the main divergences between them.

Kazantzakis' play is not simply a dramatisation of the song. Direct quotations occur only occasionally, primarily at two key points: when the bridge partially collapses at the end of Act I, and at the very end of Act II. He avoids any mention of the town of Arta or any other specific location. He greatly reduces the supernatural element. The spirit of the river does not appear at all, and a rational explanation is suggested for the repeated collapse of the bridge. The sacrifice story is placed within the context of a village society, including marginal groups like the Gypsies and the itinerant workers (the builders). Emphasis is put on the psychology of the Master Builder and other main characters, as well as the interplay between the various individuals and groups.

A basic feature of Kazantzakis' plot is that the required victim is not the wife of the Master Builder but his clandestine lover, whose identity is revealed early to the audience but not to other characters in the play. She is the beautiful Smaragda, daughter of the Landlord of the village. Dramatic tension reaches a climax when the Master Builder refuses to reveal her identity, and the Landlord threatens to sacrifice him instead. Finally Smaragda confesses publicly in order to save her lover's life.

Already in this early work we find Kazantzakis' recurring theme of the woman who represents the temptation of sensual fulfilment and the promise of domestic happiness. She is presented as hindering the dynamic hero in the fulfilment of his mission, so that she has to be set aside or sacrificed. The theme is re-enacted in his later works with characters such as Nouris' wife in *Freedom and Death* (*Καπετάν Μιχάλης*), and Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation* (*Ο τελευταίος πειρασμός του Χριστού*), to name only two. Yet some of Kazantzakis' female victims are also figures of great nobility — the widow Katerina in *Christ Recrucified* (*Ο Χριστός ξανασταυρώνεται*) is an impressive example. In *The Master Builder*, too, as Puchner (1992:320) points out, he gave his hero a worthy partner. As well as saving his life, by her sacrifice she makes it possible for the bridge to be completed successfully. A free and independent spirit, she rejects the conventional morality

of the villagers. Like her lover, the Master Builder, she despises them, not because they are her social inferiors, but because of their servile behaviour and their hypocrisy.

Kazantzakis was not the first writer to dramatise the story of the Bridge. As recently as 1905 Ilias Voutieridis had published a play named after the ballad, *The Bridge of Arta* (*To Γεφύρι της Άρτας*) and the following year Pantelis Horn published *The Inestimable* (*To ανεχτίμητο*) on the same theme. Others followed, including in 1942 *The Bridge of Arta* (*To γεφύρι της Άρτας*) by Giorgos Theotokas, well known as a novelist and essayist.<sup>3</sup> Voutieridis actually accused Kazantzakis of plagiarism. However, to judge from Puchner (1992) and Gounelas (1984), Kazantzakis' play seems very different from his, both in form (prose instead of verse) and in its ideological orientation. Among the few features which may have been inspired by Voutieridis are the character of the Mother (called a prophetess, Μάντισσα, by the earlier writer), and the name of Voutieridis' heroine, Smaragdo.<sup>4</sup> But Kazantzakis' treatment of Smaragda as a dynamic and independent character appears to be very much his own. Presumably he chose the similar name precisely to draw attention to the contrast between Voutieridis' Smaragdo and his own impressive heroine.

Kazantzakis originally entitled his play *The Sacrifice* (*Η θυσία*), but changed this in the first printed edition. As well as throwing more emphasis on the male protagonist, the new title, *The Master Builder*, suggests a comparison with another famous work of the same name, by Henrik Ibsen, dating from 1892. Ibsen's hero, like Kazantzakis', built

<sup>3</sup> For further information see Puchner, 1992:314–16. Similar stories are well known in various Balkan regions; local variants have been adapted by the Bosnian novelist Ivo Andrić in *The Bridge on the Drina* and by the Albanian Ismail Kadare in his novel *The Three-arched Bridge*, to name two famous examples. The myth is also known in Hungary, and was made into an opera, *The Tower of the Voivod*, by the composer Ernst von Dohnanyi (1922).

<sup>4</sup> The name Smaragdo, "emerald", suggests beauty and rarity, and was presumably chosen by Voutieridis for its associations; it is not found in any of the traditional versions of the ballad studied by Megas (1976:66).

his creative career on the ruins of the domestic bliss — his own and his wife's — which he was prepared to sacrifice. Where Ibsen's *Master Builder* issues a challenge to the Deity, Kazantzakis' character too shocks the villagers by his provocative attitude to Destiny (Μοίρα) and to God. Consciously or not, the young Kazantzakis seems to be inviting his readers to compare his work with that of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries.

Interesting parallels have been drawn by Ioanna Papageorgiou (2002) between Kazantzakis' play and Wilhelm Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Once again, the Greek writer seems to be carrying on a dialogue with his predecessor; Papageorgiou (2002:242) points out that in both works we have a clash between the desire for power and the demands of love, although the outcome is diametrically different.

More broadly, Kazantzakis was aware of the work of the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, whose plays were popular in Greece as elsewhere (Puchner, 2001). A leading figure in the French Symbolist movement, Maeterlinck was a strong advocate of poetical drama; in a passage which had appeared in Greek translation in the review *Η Τέχνη* (*Art*), he argued that "even in a play written in prose, we must not have a single phrase which would seem prosaic in a verse drama" (Gounelas, 1984:240). In *The Master Builder* Kazantzakis seems to have applied this maxim with considerable success. The judges who awarded him the prize in 1910 were aware of the link; in their report they described the work as "a symbolist drama of the school of Maeterlinck" (Puchner, 1995:424).

Although he did not use the word "tragedy" in the edition of his play, Kazantzakis seems to have conceived it as a modern version of the ancient Greek theatrical genre. Like ancient tragedy, it is based on a myth familiar to his audience. Kazantzakis uses motifs familiar from classical drama, such as the "hybris" characteristic of tragic heroes (Papachatzaki-Katsaraki, 1985:38). It has a chorus — or rather choruses, several groups who comment on and occasionally push forward the action: the Gipsies, the builders, the village men (harvesters) and village women. Of these, the Gipsies tend to associate with the builders

as free spirits, defying convention; the play and the opera both open with the two groups dancing together. They tend to align themselves with the Master Builder — except when he seems to want to settle down in a nice house with his sweetheart (P21–22, L66–67).<sup>5</sup> The villagers, on the other hand, both men and women, are conventional, slavish in their attitude to the powerful Landlord, and resentful of the Master Builder. Kazantzakis has adapted the ancient chorus into an integral feature of his play, creating with great economy a social context within which the drama of his protagonists is played out.

Just as in ancient theatre, music contributes to the total effect, from the builders' opening dance, accompanied by the Gipsies' tambourines and castanets, to the Singer's plaintive fluting and the dances in the intermezzo. The tambourines and castanets are heard again at the end of the play. Kazantzakis seems to have been inspired by his understanding of Wagner, who had advocated a return to the synthesis of poetry, music and dance characteristic of ancient tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

The play also conforms to the three neo-classical dramatic "unities" developed as rules by Renaissance theorists on the basis of passages in Aristotle's *Poetics*. They recommended unity of *time*, meaning that the time represented should fall within a single day; unity of *action*, in that there should be no secondary plots; and of *place*, meaning that the setting should be the same from beginning to end. If adhered to mechanically these rules can seriously inhibit the freedom which many subjects need for a successful stage work. Kazantzakis would surely not have felt constrained to observe them if it did not suit his

<sup>5</sup> References with the prefix P (=Play) indicate page-numbers in the 1910 edition of Kazantzakis' work, photographically reprinted in Kazantzakis, 1995. L (=Libretto) indicates pages in the booklet accompanying the CD of Kalomiris' opera (Kalomiris, 2003), which was chosen as the most convenient and accessible text for most readers. It does not differ significantly from the 1940 edition of the score.

<sup>6</sup> The bibliography on Wagner is too vast to indicate here. For a concise and scholarly summary, see the article in the *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition (=Sadie, 2001), vol. 26:931–73, and in particular Section 4, by Paul Sheren, p. 935.

purpose; but the story of the bridge actually lends itself to a treatment observing the three unities.<sup>7</sup>

Already then, at the age of twenty-five, Kazantzakis was au fait with trends in Greek and western European theatre. With *The Master Builder* he offers a work which is quintessentially Greek in theme and language, and yet embodies many of the new ideas and theatrical developments from the broader European arena. This theatrical project was paralleled a few years later, as we shall see, by Manolis Kalomiris when he turned *The Master Builder* into an opera.

Kazantzakis wrote *The Master Builder* at a pivotal moment in Greece's history. Crippled by debt to the western Powers, the nation had in effect declared itself bankrupt and had to submit to an international economic commission which circumscribed its sovereignty. Then in 1897, without the backing of its powerful European allies, Greece invaded Turkish territory in Macedonia and suffered a humiliating defeat. On the other hand, Kazantzakis' home island, Crete, gained its autonomy the following year under Great Power protection, and Cretans were now agitating for full union with Greece (which eventually came in 1912). The Ottoman Empire seemed to have entered an irreversible decline. Many people saw this as an opportunity to realise the "Great Idea" — that is, to create a greater Greece incorporating large parts of the disintegrating Ottoman state.

In Paris in 1907–1908 Kazantzakis attended lectures by the philosopher Henri Bergson. This thinker's idea of a "life force", *élan vital*, the element in the universe which pushes beings to new heights of creativity and freedom, became a key concept in the Cretan's philosophy — only he gave it the name of "God" (see Bien, 1989). As he explained later in his Ασκητική (Kazantzakis, 1971, published in English as *Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*), in order to give purpose to our lives we must

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<sup>7</sup> Information on the "unities" can be found in various general handbooks. The development of the theory can be traced in Bernard Weinberg's classic *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago 1963. The "unities" were not much observed in English drama, but they had considerable influence in France.



align ourselves to aid “God” in his upward struggle. Different social groups embody this vital force at different times; in Kazantzakis’ own day, he says, this role has been taken on by the working class: “Today God is a worker, driven wild by toil, by anger and by hunger, pungent with smoke, wine and sweat” (Kazantzakis 1971:76). The idea seems to be foreshadowed in the builders in the play.

In his developed thought Kazantzakis combined Bergsonian vitalism with Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch*, the superior being, “beyond good and evil”, whose dynamism pushes history forward. Significantly, Kazantzakis dedicated the 1910 edition of his play to his friend Ion Dragoumis, known as “Idas”, an essayist and advocate of a passionate populist nationalism, again influenced by Nietzsche. It is hard not to see something of the *Übermensch* in the Master Builder. Ioanna Papageorgiou (2002:236–37) comments that it is not clear whether the Master Builder actually represents the *Übermensch* or simply a precursor of that being. I would say that Kazantzakis has portrayed an exceptional man in the process of “overcoming” (as Nietzsche would say) his all-too-human nature, so as to acquire more of the character of the Nietzschean hero.

Whom did Kazantzakis see as the Master Builder of the new Greece? Kalomiris, as we shall see, proposed this role for the great Cretan statesman Eleftherios Venizelos. Venizelos did indeed pursue a policy of modernisation and expansion, which changed the face of Greece. However, in 1908, when Kazantzakis wrote the play, it was perhaps rather early to prophesy this role for his Cretan compatriot. Venizelos had not yet entered mainland Greek politics; he had become prominent in Crete, which was autonomous but technically under Ottoman overlordship. In 1905–1906 he had set up a provisional administration, pushing for union with Greece and forcing the resignation of the Greek High Commissioner on the island, Prince George (Detorakis, 1986:444–49). In October 1908 the Cretan Assembly unilaterally proclaimed union with Greece. Venizelos was a member of a five-man Provisional Government appointed by the Cretans to administer the island (ibid. 450–53). In the following year

the Military League staged a coup in mainland Greece and invited the Cretan leader to Athens to resolve the political impasse, and in 1910 Venizelos become Prime Minister of Greece. Perhaps, as Gounelas suggests (1984:273), Kazantzakis began at this point to see Venizelos as the *Übermensch* or at least the Master Builder of modern Greece. Certainly he remained a strong admirer of the new leader; during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 Kazantzakis worked for a time in the great statesman's office.

Clearly, though, Kazantzakis' play could be read from the start as an allegory of Nietzschean asceticism, of the ruthless sacrifice of personal happiness (and, in the play, a person's life) for the sake of public achievement. The message is emphasised by the work's original title, *The Sacrifice*.

But what precisely is the sacrifice for? A simple answer would of course be to say that it is for the sake of the Great Idea. However, to what extent this idea was dominant in Kazantzakis' mind when he originally conceived the work, is another matter. We should not forget that the Master Builder and his men are trying to overcome by their skill an apparently unconquerable natural force, the mighty river. On the very last page the builders describe themselves as "the cranes who bring [...] the black swallows of the Springtime of the Mind" (οι γερανοί που φέρνομε [...] τα μαύρα χελιδόνια της Άνοιξης του Νου — the capitals are in the 1910 edition). They and their leader, the Master Builder, could be taken as representing the triumph of technology and industry over nature, the kind of progress which Venizelists and others believed necessary for Greece to take its place in the modern world. The builders' consciousness of their historical role balances the dominant figure of the dynamic hero.

Readers may perceive in this a sense of the historical role of the mass of the people, part of what Gounelas in the title of his monograph (1984) describes as a "socialist consciousness". Gounelas shows that many Greek writers at the time combined this consciousness with a belief in the need for a Nietzschean superhero, who would act as a catalyst for social change. No necessary contradiction was

perceived at first between socialism and nationalist or Nietzschean thought. Gounelas (1984:13–14) aptly cites the example of George Bernard Shaw's play *Man and Superman*, which was published in 1903 with accompanying texts setting out the author's political and artistic credo. Gounelas' analysis is enlightening, provided that we understand his term "socialist" in a broad sense. No-one in Kazantzakis' play is advocating a socialist political programme, though there certainly is a suggestion, in the builders' phrase quoted above, of the advent of *some* kind of major change, the "Springtime of the Mind".

Kazantzakis' attitude to specific ideologies around this time is well illustrated by a review he wrote in 1910 of a work by Dragoumis. After praising Dragoumis' passionate nationalism, he remarks (as paraphrased by Bien, 1989:17) that "it makes no difference whether we support nationalism or its enemy, international socialism, since the former is no truer than the latter; both being 'true' only subjectively. [...] We should therefore choose whichever ideology suits our personality and then proceed *as if* we believed [...]", in order to give meaning and purpose to our lives.

In any case, the legend of the bridge has a timeless power, which is brilliantly conveyed in the best versions of the folksong as well as in the play. Kazantzakis has avoided any very specific political or historical allusions; as we have seen, he does not even ascribe a specific location to the bridge.

Allegory of more general kinds seem to be built deeply into the structure of *The Master Builder*. The Master Builder has no resources of his own beyond his knowledge and skill. He is not a native of the place; he is a marginal, temporary resident, employed by the Landlord to carry out a specific task. He and his men expect and are expected to move on once they have finished the bridge. The degree to which he has been distracted by his relationship with Smaragda is suggested by his request for a house to live in with the woman (as yet unnamed) whom he intends to marry — though even then he reassures his men (P22) that they will not stay for long. (In Kazantzakis' day major construction work in Epirus and elsewhere was indeed undertaken by bands

(μπουλούκια) of skilled craftsmen whose livelihood depended on their mobility.) It foreshadows the dream of domestic bliss which recurs much later in a far more famous work, *The Last Temptation*. Significant too is the builders' insistence that "A leader is not master of his own life" (Ένας αρχηγός δεν ορίζει τη ζωή του, Πρωτομάστορα!," P37).

The Landlord, for his part, is providing the resources for the bridge to be built. He supports the Master Builder so long as the work is successful, but is prepared to sacrifice him when it seems that he is hindering its completion. As for the villagers, they obviously want the bridge to be finished, but they are fatalistic and, as Smaragda says, servile. They generally show the more conservative attitudes of a rural population. The Singer too has a place in this allegorical scheme: he is the artist who worships beauty and cultivates it for its own sake, who observes events but is unable to intervene dynamically. His role clearly reflects some of Kazantzakis' own dilemmas.

*The Master Builder* is not usually given a prominent place in the Kazantzakis canon. But it deserves to be reconsidered, not least for the richness of allegorical interpretations which it invites and for the intertextual dialogue which it provokes with the powerful folksong and with the work of other playwrights. Its importance in theatre history has been convincingly supported by Peter Bien (1975) and Walter Puchner (1995), to name only two scholars. But it has a further claim for attention; *The Master Builder* provided the text for a remarkable opera, which itself has an important place in the history of Greek music.

Manolis Kalomiris' "musical tragedy" (to use his term for it) was first performed in 1916, six years after the publication of Kazantzakis' work. Since the drama had still not been seen in the theatre, this was in effect the first stage presentation of *The Master Builder* in any form. To this day Kalomiris' work has probably reached a far wider public than the original play.

In the programme note for the 1916 production, the composer makes an important statement of his aims. "*The Master Builder* is not an opera — at least not in the way people have come to use this term in

everyday language for the musical drama. It does not aim at presenting various musical pieces linked roughly together by a dramatic plot, in which impressive costumes play a major role. Far from it. It aims to reinforce the tragic effect created by the drama with all the expressive means which the art of music has at its command.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the music is not an end in itself. It is intended to serve the needs of dramatic expression. But despite the composer’s assertion, the work clearly does fit into a modern definition of opera, and it is commonly known by that term.

Kalomiris’ choice of musical forms and style was carefully thought out. As he made clear in the 1916 programme note, he intended from the start to offer a new kind of Greek music: his ambition was “not simply, and not primarily, to display a Greek colouring, but rather to reveal the Greek soul.”<sup>9</sup> He did this by combining elements of Greek music with the forms and apparatus of western symphonic composition. His choice of Kazantzakis’ *The Master Builder* was linked to his broad aims. “The reason why the composer chose the tragedy *The Master Builder*, which is freely based on a familiar popular legend, was because legend alone, the “myth” of ancient Greek tragedy, accepts easily, and indeed requires, musical elaboration, a musical atmosphere.”<sup>10</sup> It is as if he too was aiming to create a modern equivalent of ancient tragedy.

Of course Kalomiris was not the first to see opera as reflecting the

<sup>8</sup> “Ο Πρωτομάστορας δεν είναι όπερα — όπως τουλάχιστον ο κόσμος συνήθισε να λέγει κοινά το μουσικό δράμα. Δεν έρχεται να παρουσιάσει διάφορα κομμάτια μουσικά, δεμένα όπως-όπως μεταξύ τους με μίαν υπόθεση, όπου παίζουνε μέρος μεγάλο οι φανταχτερές στολές. Κάθε άλλο. Θέλει, με όλα τα εκφραστικά μέσα που η μουσική τέχνη έχει στην υποταγή της, να δυναμώσει την τραγική εντύπωση που γεννιέται από το δράμα.” (Prolegomena to the 1940 edition, reprinted in the booklet accompanying the CD (Kalomiris, 2003:3).

<sup>9</sup> “Και η μουσική του έχει τη φιλοδοξία να δείξει, όχι τόσο και μόνο, το ελληνικό χρώμα, παρά την ψυχή την ελληνική” (ibid.).

<sup>10</sup> “Διάλεξε ο μουσικός την τραγωδία του Πρωτομάστορα, μια λεύτερη δημιουργία θεμελιωμένη πάνω σε γνώριμο δημοτικό θρύλο, γιατί πιστεύει πως ο θρύλος μονάχα, ο μύθος της αρχαίας τραγωδίας, καλοδέχεται, και τη ζητάει μάλιστα, την επεξεργασία της μουσικής, τη μουσική ατμόσφαιρα” (ibid.).

conventions of ancient theatre. This had been a common view from the early history of opera, though the ways in which it was realised in practice were very varied. In the nineteenth century the theme had been developed forcefully by Wagner in his Zurich essays, beginning in 1849.<sup>11</sup> The young composer advocated uniting the arts of poetry, music and dance in the way he believed characteristic of the ancient Greek theatre. This of course was the kind of synthesis he tried to realise in his own great works.

Kalomiris' thought and technique was strongly influenced by Wagner, as he himself pointed out in the next paragraph of his programme note. He describes his theory about the use of myth, quoted above, as Wagnerian, βαγνερική, and he notes also that in his use of musical leitmotifs he is "Wagnerising", βαγνερίζει. In general his close synthesis of music and drama owes much to the German master; he also makes good use of the third element in the Wagnerian triad, namely dance. But in a sense too he is building on the Wagnerian foundations laid by Kazantzakis; for Kazantzakis, as we have seen, was an admirer of the German composer and cleverly integrated both music and dance into his tragedy.

Kalomiris was not the first composer to use Greek melodies or musical styles in an opera; as early as 1858 Pavlos Karrer had written the tune of "Ο Γέρο-Δήμος" for his opera *Markos Botsaris* (Μάρκος Μπότσαρης) in imitation of a folk melody (Mandakas, 1984:110). Nonetheless *The Master Builder* marked the beginning of Kalomiris' distinguished career as the best-known proponent of the "National School" of symphonic music. In it he put into practice his own concept of what this meant, rejecting as he did the "Italianate" influences of the Heptanesian composers of the previous century.

The opera expressed brilliantly the spirit of the moment at which it was conceived. A lot had happened since the publication of Kazantzakis' play. Crete had been united with Greece, and the Balkan Wars had enabled Greece to take in large areas of formerly Ottoman

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<sup>11</sup> For an introduction see the encyclopedia article by Paul Scheren (Sadie, 2001:935).

territory in the north. But when the First World War broke out, the country found itself divided. The Prime Minister, Venizelos, wanted to join Britain and France in the hope of gaining more territory from a defeated Ottoman Empire, while King Constantine advocated neutrality. The composer, like Kazantzakis, was an ardent Venizelist, and the play could be interpreted as being extremely topical. Kalomiris actually dedicated his work to Eleftherios Venizelos, “the Master Builder of Greater Greece” (στον Πρωτομάστορα της Μεγάλης Ελλάδας) (Kalomiris, 1917).

Kalomiris made revisions to his score at various times, as late as 1944. However, the version consulted for this study was the second edition, a version for piano and voices, with a libretto corresponding very closely to the one used on a currently available CD. This edition was published in 1940, at another critical moment in Greece’s history. Towards the end of that year, Greece was challenged and attacked by Fascist Italy, and Greeks once again had to face the need for heroic sacrifice. The Greek army held out with great heroism on the Albanian front in the winter of 1940–1941, but in the following spring overwhelming German forces poured down into the country from the north, and the Nazi occupation began. It would not have been difficult for Kalomiris to foresee something of this crisis as he prepared the opera for its second edition in the preceding months.

The allegorical messages of the opera would not have been lost on audiences who attended the performances staged in 1943–1944, during those harsh years of Occupation. The role of Smaragda was sung by a young and comparatively unknown soprano, Maria Callas.<sup>12</sup>

Kalomiris’ libretto is not greatly different in length from the play; in the 1916 edition, whose page-size and format is similar to that of Kazantzakis’ 1910 play-text, it has 45 pages as opposed to Kazantzakis’ 42. The composer preserves the structure and all main episodes of Kazantzakis’ work. He also preserves the play’s internal proportions,

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<sup>12</sup> My immediate source for this is the website <http://callas.free.fr>, though further information should be easily available in the enormous bibliography on Callas’ career.

with Part I (Kazantzakis' Act I) about twice as long as Part II and a brief Intermezzo between them. Formally, he divides Part I into two "scenes", of which the first ends with the long dance of the Gypsies and villagers celebrating the presumed completion of the bridge. Even here, though, there is no actual change of scene, and in the 1940 score (Kalomiris, 1940:132) the composer expresses his wish for the performance to continue without a break.

In Kalomiris' *Master Builder* there is none of the simplification of the plot common when a work is adapted for opera, made necessary by the fact that sung words take up more time than spoken ones and song in general has a different aesthetic economy. Nor are there any significant changes to the order of episodes and speeches. The structure of Kazantzakis' play helped the composer to achieve this: its plot is simple, with comparatively few major characters. *The Master Builder* in this sense is at the opposite end of the spectrum from another fine Kazantzakian opera, Bohuslav Martinů's *Greek Passion*, based on the novel *Christ Recrucified*, where whole episodes and various minor characters had to be removed.

Kalomiris preserved all of Kazantzakis' cast of characters, with no significant changes, apart from the different treatment of Smaragda and her relationship with the Master Builder, which we will discuss below. He conveys slightly more clearly than Kazantzakis the contrast between the timid and conventional villagers and the Gypsies, who see the Master Builder as a kindred spirit. This can be seen, for example, in the changes Kalomiris made in the Intermezzo (see Appendix II below).

Large parts of the libretto are in prose, preserving many of Kazantzakis' striking phrases. Elsewhere the composer rearranged or adapted the words to conform to a simple verse structure, with regular rhythm and rhyme. In the versions of the libretto which he published himself (Kalomiris, 1916 and 1930), without the musical score, these sections are actually written out as verse; in the version accompanying the CD (Kalomiris, 2003) they are not differentiated from the prose sections.

In adapting a speech or dialogue Kalomiris sometimes keeps very



close to the original, perhaps shortening it and perhaps repeating a phrase or phrases. At other times the libretto expands phrases from the play into longer sections. Even here, though, it usually preserves at least the overall sense and the sequence of ideas. In the summary in Appendix II below, some passages which recur word for word in play and opera have been translated into English and placed within inverted commas, in order to render something of the style of the original. However, these are only samples, and the actual proportion of the opera's text which follows the play very closely is much greater.

An example of a passage which Kalomiris adopted almost word for word is the Mother's first speech when she confronts the Master Builder, which in Kazantzakis reads as follows:

Ποιος είσαι συ, Νέε, που τόσο παιδιακίσια και τόσο απόκοτα παίρνεις  
απάνω στο λαιμό σου τόσες ψυχές ανθρώπων; Τρεις φορές ως τώρα  
μαυροφόρεςες το χωριό μου, πνίγοντας τους στρατολάτες που περ-  
νούσανε απάνω από το σαπιοθέμελο γιοφύρι των χεριών σου... Ποιος  
είσαι συ; (P25)

("Who are you, young man, who so childishy and so brazenly make  
yourself responsible for [literally: take upon your own neck] so many  
people's souls? Three times already you have plunged my village into  
mourning, drowning the wayfarers who were crossing the bridge with  
its rotten foundations, the work of your hands... Who are you?")

Kalomiris here (L70) omits some unessential words (ανθρώπων, "people's", the second τόσο, "so", and στο λαιμό, "on [your] neck"), and replaces Kazantzakis' παιδιακίσια ("childishly") and περνούσανε ("were crossing") with synonyms, παιδιάστικα and διαβαίνανε. After the first sentence he repeats Ποιος είσαι; Ποιος είσαι; Ποιος είσαι, που παίρνεις ψυχές ("Who are you? Who are you? Who are you, you who take souls"), and at the end "Ποιος είσαι συ, Νέε; Ποιος είσαι; Ποιος είσαι; ("Who are you, young man? Who are you? Who are you?"). The repetitions help to create an emotional climax at this pivotal moment in the work.

Sections of the libretto which are in verse naturally tend to depart further from Kazantzakis' wording. Here too, though, key motifs and phrases are generally preserved. This is well illustrated by a passage where Smaragda has been distributing gifts to the villagers. The Singer comments on how her hands spread joy around; one and a half lines of Kazantzakis' prose become twelve short lines of verse. The libretto adds new metaphors: Smaragda's hands light fires in men's hearts, shine with secret desire, and set the Singer on fire with sweet pain. In this way, starting from a mere phrase in Kazantzakis, the libretto introduces the theme of hands — Smaragda's, the Master Builder's, and what they can create — which is developed as a focus for lyrical passages in the opera. Smaragda now enquires what gift he would like, and the singer asks for a rose to perfume his whole life. Smaragda tells him she has a more suitable gift, a new flute; two and a half lines of prose become six short lines of verse in the libretto. The two versions are quoted below for comparison, first the play and then the libretto; in the latter, words taken unchanged from Kazantzakis are printed here in italics.

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔ. [Κοιτάζει εκστατικός τη Σμαράγδα.] Τα χέρια σου, Σμαράγδα, αχ! πώς μοιράζουν τη χαρά — σαν το ζεστό ψωμί!

ΣΜΑΡΑΓΔΑ. — Και σένα, Τραγουδιστή μου, τι θες να σου χαρίσω;

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔ. — Ένα ρόδο. Ένα ρόδο από τα χέρια σου φτάνει να μου μοσκομυρίσει όλη μου τη ζωή...

ΣΜΑΡΑΓΔΑ. [Γελά.] — Πόσο εύκολα γεμίζει όλη σου η ζωούλα, Τραγουδιστή μου! Κι εγώ που σου κρατούσα μιαν ολοκαίνουργη φλογέρα! [Βγάζει από τα στήθια της και του δίνει μια φλογέρα.]

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔ. [Της πίνει και της γλυκοφιλεί τα χέρια.] — Α! τα χέρια τα θαυματουργά σου, πώς ξέρουνε κι ανοίγουν όλες τις πόρτες της χαράς! (P14)

In the first edition of the libretto (Kalomiris, 1916:18–19) the passage appears as follows:

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔΙΣΤΗΣ

*Αχ! Τα χέρια σου, Σμαράγδα,  
πώς μοιράζουν τη χαρά!  
Λάμπουνε· θαρρείς κι ανάβουν  
στις καρδιές φωτιά.  
Λάμπουνε, θαρρείς και φέγγουν  
μ' έναν πόθο μυστικό·  
λάμπουνε, και με φλογίζουν  
με πόνο γλυκό...  
Αχ! Τα χέρια σου, Σμαράγδα,  
πώς μοιράζουν τη χαρά!  
Λάμπουνε· θαρρείς κι ανάβουν  
Στις καρδιές φωτιά.*

ΣΜΑΡΑΓΔΑ

*Και τι μένει να χαρίσω  
Στον Τραγουδιστή;*

ΤΡΑΓΟΥΔΙΣΤΗΣ

*Ένα ρόδο σου ας μυρώσει  
Τη θλιμμένη μου ζωή!*

ΣΜΑΡΑΓΔΑ

*Δε σου πρέπει ένα λουλούδι  
Που γοργά θα μαραθεί·  
Πάρε, πάρε μια φλογέρα,  
Κι αυτή σαν τραγούδι  
Στην πνοή σου γλυκά θα λαλεί.*

(In the text accompanying the CD (L53–54), the lines are written as prose but are otherwise unchanged.) It is characteristic of the libretto that in Smaragda's reply to the Singer's request, her mildly sarcastic comment about how easy it is to fill the Singer's "little life" (ζωούλα) has disappeared! Instead she merely remarks that the flower he asked for would quickly fade, while the flute will continue to produce sweet music.

In making the adaptation Kalomiris was aided by three poets: Nikolaos Poriotis, Giorgos Stefopoulos and Theano Drakopoulou, better

known by her *nom-de-plume* Myrtiotissa. The passage quoted above, “Oh, your hands, Smaragda, how they spread joy about” (L53–54) is by Poriotis.<sup>13</sup>

Another addition to the play text occurs when Smaragda has showered the Master Builder with roses, and he replies in traditional fifteen-syllable lines, beginning: “How I love your hands, your slender hands, which always bring me armfuls of roses and caresses” (L56). His lines in the libretto are an expansion of a line in the play which actually fits into the fifteen-syllable verse form: “που αγκαλιές μου φέρνουνε τα χάρδια και τα ρόδα” (P16). In the opera, Smaragda replies in the same metre: “How I love your hands, your powerful hands, which always accept my armfuls of roses and my caresses”. They then sing a duet, “Evening is coming once more, my love, darkness is falling, the world around me grows dim and you alone give light” (L57). These gentle, lyrical passages are not striking as poetry, and they contrast with the sparse dynamism of Kazantzakis’ prose, but in combination with Kalomiris’ music they perform a valuable artistic function. Some of the lines recur with terrible poignancy at the end, when Smaragda is going to her death (L94).

A similar treatment of Kazantzakis’ text occurs later in Part I, where the Master Builder’s request for a mansion to live in with his beloved as payment for his work is expanded in the libretto into an aria (“Ένα παλάτι, Άρχοντα”), with words by Myrtiotissa (L65). This too is in fifteen-syllable verse and in fact incorporates a line from the folksong.

In his libretto Kalomiris adds further material taken directly from the folksong and not found in the play text. This occurs, characteristically, at the very beginning, where the Builders sing three lines from the ballad, describing the initial situation. Kalomiris’ source was a version different from the Zambelios-Passow one; its text appears to have been:

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13 Information from Phivos Anoyanakis’ *Catalogue of the Works of Manolis Kalomiris*, on the Manolis Kalomiris Society website ([www.kalomiris.org](http://www.kalomiris.org)).

Σαράντα μαστορόπουλα κι εξήντα δυο μαστόροι  
γιοφύριν εστεριώνανε στις Άρτας το ποτάμι.  
Ολημερίς το χτίζανε, το βράδυ γκρεμιζόταν. (L47)

Having sung the phrase from the song “Γιοφύριν εστεριώνανε” (“were constructing a bridge”) they repeat it with a variation (“Γιοφύριν εστεριώσαμε”, “we have constructed a bridge”), expressing their belief that the work is now finished. The villagers (harvesters) reply with the half-line “Σίδερο το γιοφύρι”, “The bridge (is) strong as iron” (L48), a phrase derived from the end of the folksong, where the doomed woman uses it to express her final wish for the safety of the structure. Here, however, Kalomiris is following Kazantzakis; these three words are in fact the first words of the play. They are heard again at the end of both play and opera; in Kalomiris’ libretto the phrase is repeated exactly. In the libretto, the first two lines are repeated on L50 (again using the form “we have constructed”) and the first line recurs again on L54. It is characteristic of Kalomiris’ approach that when Kazantzakis uses two lines from the song, “Alas for our labour, alas for our work, to build all day and have it collapse each night” (P23, =lines 5–6 in the version printed in Appendix I), Kalomiris adopts them too in his libretto (L68). Line 5 is used again as a vivid expression of the builders’ despair by Kazantzakis at P28 and by Kalomiris near the end of his opera, L96.

At the end of the opera Kalomiris again introduces lines from the folksong not used by Kazantzakis, in which the victim laments (L96): “We were three sisters, each with a harsh destiny; one bridged the Danube, the second built Avlona,<sup>14</sup> and I, the youngest, am building the bridge of Arta” (lines 34–36 in our version). The lines suggest something of the strangeness of the song, the supernatural element, which Kazantzakis generally played down. As with other additions

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<sup>14</sup> Avlona is a transliteration of Aulwvna(~), the name of various places in the Greek world. The one referred to here is probably the important port of Vlorë in southern Albania, known also by its Italian name Valona.

made by Kalomiris, the lines bring the audience's attention to focus on Smaragda.

She goes on, in the libretto, to curse the bridge, again using lines from the song: "As my poor heart trembles, so may the bridge tremble, and as my hair falls out, so may people fall from it."<sup>15</sup> (Kazantzakis had transferred this image to the builders who express their fear for the safety of the structure: "What if the bridge trembles the way her heart trembles, the way her voice trembles?" P45). The Master Builder asks her to change her curse, not (as in the song) because her brother may try to cross, but "because your lover asks and begs it of you" (L96). And so Smaragda transforms her curse into a benevolent wish, again following the song. Kazantzakis too had made use of the woman's final words in the folksong, though with slight modifications. Smaragda's curse adds a further moment of dramatic tension at the end of the opera, as well as once again focusing the audience's attention and emotional involvement upon Smaragda.

It is worth quoting here the musicologist Giorgos Leotsakos, who notes that Kalomiris "distances himself from the open misogyny of the libretto and the ingeniously concealed misogyny of Wagner's creations, offering his soul to the Singer [...] and to Smaragda. She is the focal point of the opera — it could easily have been given the title *Smaragda*. In her figure Kalomiris transforms the dramatic kernel of the text, human sacrifice as a precondition of creation. [...] The sacrifice becomes an act of love."<sup>16</sup> Leotsakos' point about the shift of focus on to Smaragda is correct. However, it is not effected simply by Kalomiris' dazzling music, which is Leotsakos' main theme, but also by the changes and additions which he made to Kazantzakis' text in preparing the libretto with the help of his poet friends. The arias and duets based on the theme of hands — Smaragda's and her lover's — contribute significantly to this.

<sup>15</sup> L96 = lines 37–38 in the version printed in Appendix I.

<sup>16</sup> The text in Greek in Kalomiris, 2003:13. By "libretto" in the first sentence Leotsakos may be referring to Kazantzakis' text.

Misogynistic comments can indeed be found in Kazantzakis' play, even at key points, as on the final page where half the chorus of Gipsy women praise the Master Builder: "You have ridden victorious through the straits of youth, where Woman [...] lies in wait and kills" ("παραμονεύει και σκοτώνει", P47). Kalomiris, characteristically, omits these lines. There is tension in the play between comments such as this and the very positive portrayal of Smaragda. For in the play too, Smaragda's sacrifice is an act of love, just as it is in the opera; one of the very last lines of Kazantzakis' text, uttered by the Singer, is "Love is more powerful even than death" (P46).

At the very end Kalomiris added a personal touch. He makes the workers congratulate the Master Builder with the same words, "Γεια σου, Καλέ, χαρά σου", which the great poet Palamas used of the composer himself in a poem addressed to him (Kalomiris, 1988:152).

Our answer, then, to one of the questions formulated at the beginning of this study, is that Kalomiris' adaptation is close to the letter as well as the spirit of Kazantzakis' drama. It is important to stress this, as Kalomiris' description of his libretto as a "verse adaptation" (στιχουργική διασκευή) of the play might be taken as implying a much more radical departure from Kazantzakis' text. To a considerable extent, the words we hear are Kazantzakis' own. The tendency to focus more on Smaragda, on her tender and heroic love for the Master Builder, is important, and very attractive, though it too is largely a change in the balance between elements which already exist in Kazantzakis' play.

Kazantzakis' play more or less asked to be set to music, and not simply because of the writer's own use of music and dance in his dramatisation of the ballad. He uses a fluent, robust, eloquent demotic, without the extreme preference for dialect forms and unusual syntax which gives some of his later poetry a forced tone. His imagery is often genuinely poetical.

So for Kalomiris, intent on developing a "National School" of symphonic music according to his own concept, it was a fine opportunity to test his talent. Kazantzakis' play, with its origins in a popular myth,

provided an ideal vehicle for him to create, as he put it, “new themes and new melodies of his own, which would always however be Greek in character”. But like much great art built on a firm foundation of local and national tradition, Kalomiris’ work has the potential to transcend the boundaries of time, place and cultural background. This is due partly to the intrinsic drama of the story, to the carefully structured plot and to the range of allegorical meanings which can be found in it. A major role is also of course played by Kalomiris’ music, which is beyond the scope of this study.

## **Appendix I: The Folk Ballad as published by Zambelios and Passow**

### **Summary**

Builders and apprentices are constructing a bridge. To their despair, their work collapses each night. The spirit of the river (το στοιχειό) appears, perhaps in the shape of a bird. It announces that in order to complete the work they must make a human sacrifice of the beautiful wife of their leader, the Master Builder.

Her husband sends a supernatural messenger, the nightingale, to tell her to delay her daily visit to the worksite. But the bird gives her the opposite message: she must come quickly.

So the Master Builder’s wife arrives and greets her husband and the workers. But why is he upset? They tell her he has lost his ring; it has fallen near an arch of the bridge. So she has herself lowered on a chain to search. Failing to find it, she asks to be drawn up again. Instead, the builders pile masonry around her, and her husband joins in with a huge stone.

The doomed woman curses the bridge. “As my heart trembles, so may the bridge tremble; as my hair falls out, so may wayfarers fall from the bridge”. But someone reminds her that she has a dear brother, who may happen to cross the bridge. So the song ends with her changing her curse to a wish for its soundness and safety.



## Greek text

Σαράντα πέντε μάστοροι κι εξήντα μαθητάδες  
 Τρεις χρόνους εδουλεύανε της Άρτας το γιοφύρι.  
 Ολημερίς echίζανε, κι από βραδί γκρεμιέτα.  
 Μοιριολογούν οι μάστορες και κλαιν οι μαθητάδες:  
 “Αλίμονο στους κόπους μας, κρίμα στες δούλεψές μας, 5  
 ολημερίς να χτίζομε, το βράδυ να γκρεμιέται.”  
 Και το στοιχείο ποκρίθηκεν απ’ τη δεξιά καμάρα:  
 “Αν δε στοιχειώσεται άνθρωπο, τοίχος δε θεμελιώνει,  
 και μη στοιχειώσεται ορφανό, μη ξένο, μη διαβάτη, 10  
 παρά του πρωτομάστορα την ώρα τη γυναικα,  
 πόρχετ’ αργά τ’ αποταχιά, πόρχετ’ αργά στο γιόμα.”  
 Τ’ άκουσ’ ο πρωτομάστορας και του θανάτου πέφτει·  
 Κάνει γραφή και στέλνει την με το πουλί τ’ αηδόνη:  
 “Αργά ντυθεί, αργά αλλαχτεί, αργά να πάει στο γιόμα,  
 αργά να πάει και να διαβεί της Άρτας το γιοφύρι.” 15  
 Και το πουλί παράκουσε, κι αλλιώς επήγε κ’ είπε:  
 “Γοργά ντύσου, γοργά άλλαξε, γοργά να πας το γιόμα,  
 γοργά να πας και να διαβείς της Άρτας το γιοφύρι.”  
 Να τηνε και ξανάφανεν από την άσπρη στράτα.  
 Την είδ’ ο πρωτομάστορας, ραγίζετ’ η καρδιά του. 20  
 Από μακριά τούς χαιρετά κι από κοντά τούς λέγει:  
 “Γεια σας, χαρά σας, μάστορες κι εσείς οι μαθητάδες,  
 μα τ’ έχει ο πρωτομάστορας κι είν’ έτσι χολιασμένο;”  
 “Το δαχτυλίδι τ’ όπεσε στην πρώτη την καμάρα,  
 και ποιος να μπει και ποιος να βγει το δαχτυλίδι νά βρει;” 25  
 “Μάστορα, μην πικραίνεσαι κι εγώ να πα σ’ το φέρω:  
 εγώ να μπω, κι εγώ να βγω, το δαχτυλίδι νά βρω.”  
 Μηδέ καλά κατέβηκε, μηδέ στη μέση επήγε,  
 “Τράβα, καλέ μ’, την άλυσο, τράβα την αλυσίδα,  
 τ’ όλον τον κόσμ’ ανάγειρα και τίποτες δεν ηύρα.” 30  
 Ένας πιχάει με το μυστρί, κι άλλος με τον ασβέστη,  
 παίρνει κι ο πρωτομάστορας και ρίχνει μέγα λίθο.  
 “Αλίμονο στη μοίρα μας, κρίμα στο ριζικό μας,  
 τρεις αδερφάδες ήμασαν κι οι τρεις κακογραμμένες.  
 Η μια ’χτισε το Δούναβη, κι η άλλη τον Αυλώνα, 35

κι εγώ η πλιό στερνότερη της Άρτας το γιοφύρι.  
 Καθώς τρέμ' η καρδούλα μου, να τρέμει το γιοφύρι,  
 κι ως πέφτουν τα μαλλάκια μου, να πέφτουν οι διαβάτες.”  
 “Κόρη, τον λόγον άλλαξε, κι άλλη κατάρα δώσε,  
 Πόχεις μονάκριβ' αδερφό, μη λάχει και περάσει.” 40  
 Κι αυτή τον λόγον άλλαξε, κι άλλη κατάρα δίνει:  
 “Σίδερον η καρδούλα μου, σίδερο κι οι διαβάτες.  
 Τι έχω 'δερφό στην ξενιτιά, μη λάχει και περάσει.”

(Passow, 1860:389–391, = Zambelios, 1852:757–58; reprinted in Petropoulos, 1958, vol. 1:72–73)

## Appendix II: Summary of the Play and the Opera

Italics indicate passages in the play which are omitted in the libretto, or were moved by Kalomiris to a different position. < > indicates passages in the libretto which are not found in the play, or which occupy a different position in Kazantzakis' text. Inverted commas indicate passages which have been translated into English more or less word for word from the play. As in the main text of this study, the prefix P indicates page-numbers in the 1910 edition and in the recent reprint (Kazantzakis, 1995); page-numbers prefixed by the letter L refer to the Greek libretto, as it is reprinted in the booklet accompanying the CD of the opera (Kalomiris, 2003).

The stage set shows part of a riverside plain with the bridge at the rear (P5, L46). As the curtain opens, the builders are dancing to celebrate the completion of their task, while Gipsy women provide the rhythm with tambourines and castanets. A group of villagers returning from the harvest cross the bridge, fearfully, and enter the stage. Some express their admiration for the new bridge, but generally they are very nervous, and an Old Man gives voice to their fears (P6, L48). He has no doubt that it will collapse once more. Three times, he says, as soon as the bridge was finished, the river flooded and destroyed it. *A pale woman remembers with horror the latest flood. A villager arrives with the news that the Mother, the wise woman of the village, is prophesying catastrophe*

once more and is cursing the person responsible (P7). *The Old Man reminds them that three times already the Mother's dire prophesies have come true. The river will once more "throw down the bridle of slavery which the Landlord insists on placing upon it; it will drown our children and our sheep and rot our crops"* (P7–8).

Three terrified girls arrive on stage: the river is seething, threatening. "It wants a human sacrifice", says the Old Man (P9, L50). *He takes the men aside: it wants us to sacrifice the Master Builder. They agree: he is the cause of our troubles. Let's lie in wait and kill him!* In comes the young Singer with his flute (P10, L51). He is in love, from afar, with Smaragda, the beautiful daughter of the village's Landlord (Αρχοντάς). But the others mock him.

Smaragda herself arrives with gifts for the harvesters (P12, L53). *But why aren't they celebrating? "We're waiting for the bridge to collapse again", says the Old Man.* Smaragda is confident that this time the bridge will stand firm. *The Singer detects an unspoken joy in her manner. "Shush", she tells him, "I have my secrets too."* She distributes her gifts — bracelets, scarves, ribbons for the girls. <In the opera the Singer sings an aria: "Oh your hands, Smaragda, how they spread joy about".> She presents him with a special gift, a new flute (P14, L54).

The Master Builder leaves the dancing workmen and comes to join Smaragda. She grows pale. *The Singer notices how the Master Builder's feet grew wings when he saw her.* The music and dancing stop. The Master Builder addresses her: "What have you got for me, Smaragda" (P15, L56). In reply, she throws roses over his hair and shoulders. <In the opera, there follow arias by the Master Builder and Smaragda, both beginning "How I love your hands", followed by a duet, "Evening is falling once more" (L57).> Both are longing for evening to come, to be alone. But, says Smaragda, "Not even you, Master Builder, know which you love most, your art, or me" (P16, L58).

The Master Builder is triumphant at completing the bridge. But the village men <in the libretto: the Old Man alone> remind him that three times it has collapsed. The Old Man warns him: "*No-one has overturned God's laws without peril. [...] God made the river free [...]*

Who are you [...] that dare to enslave it?" He curses the Master Builder, the labourers and all their works (P17, L59). The villagers echo his curse. The Master Builder answers just as roughly. *"Aren't you afraid of Destiny?" shout the village men. "Destiny", he replies, "is like soft dough in the hands of men"* (P17–18). <In the opera too he insists that he is not afraid of Destiny.> *Smaragda too is frightened, but the Master Builder reassures her: they have the minds of slaves.* They remind him: "God is above us, watching". *"I don't care who's above us", the Master Builder replies, "[...] It will not fall down"* (P18). <In the opera, the builders and Gipsy women retort: "God is a long way away..." (L60).>

At this point, thunder is heard (P19, L60). The villagers are terrified. *"What will happen to us now? He'll bring destruction on all of us, young and old!"* The Master Builder mocks their cowardice. The Old Man <in the libretto: together with other villagers> moves to attack him, *but others hold him back, and the builders run up to defend their boss.*

Trumpets sound. The Landlord, Smaragda's father, appears on the bridge (P20, L62). The villagers back off, cowed. "Why aren't you all dancing", asks the Landlord. [...] "Something's the matter. Why are you all upset?" Subdued, the Old Man replies: "We were just going to start the song and dance to celebrate!"

<In the libretto, Scene 2 begins here, L64.> The Landlord congratulates the Master Builder; he is delighted that the fierce river has been tamed. Ever since it drowned his son, he says, he has sworn to enslave it, so that people could pass safely over and it could do nothing. The villagers congratulate their lord (P21, L65). *But Smaragda murmurs: "Oh, how craven, how slavish!"*

The Landlord asks the Master Builder what reward he would like. "A big house to live in with the woman I've chosen to marry!" Small enough payment, says the Landlord. But the builders are dismayed: "Are you abandoning us?" Their boss tries to reassure them: "We'll just rest here for a while and then we'll move on." They are not convinced: "Some evil spirit must have deprived you of your wits." "That's why we're seeing your work tremble and collapse" (P22, L66). But the

Singer and the Landlord encourage him to stay, and the Landlord asks who is to be his bride.

At this moment, *thunder is heard again, the storm approaches*, the bridge shudders, and part of it collapses (P23, L68). The builders lament: “Alas for our labour, alas for our work! To build all day and have it collapse at evening!”<sup>17</sup> The onlookers are about to scatter, terrified, when they see the Mother approaching, guided by a little girl. They appeal to her: only she can save them. The Master Builder protests: “What are you afraid of? I’m here. *There was some error in the construction*. Aren’t you ashamed? Are you going to listen to this witch?”

But the Mother challenges him (P25, L70): “Who are you, young man? [...] Three times you have plunged our village into mourning, causing people to be drowned as they passed over your bridge with its rotten foundations!” The Master Builder replies in kind: he is afraid of nothing. All chide him for his arrogance towards the Mother. “Who is to blame?” the Landlord asks her. “The Master Builder”, comes the reply (P26, L72). The Master Builder laughs, but she persists: “Yes, you! You! You who came to wrestle on life’s bloody threshing-floor,<sup>18</sup> before you’d ever put on the *sevenfold, iron belt of pain*” (P26, L73). Strange words, but she explains: “His hands are trembling for female flesh [...]. He is not pure. A woman’s kisses [...] are preventing him from seeing clearly and far (P27, L73). [...] Every morning when he comes to work his eyes are heavy *and his mind is elsewhere*”. *Smaragda breaks down in tears, but the Mother presses home her message: people who aim to achieve great works must forget for ever “the sweet, shaded path of happiness”*.

The bridge demands a sacrifice, says the Mother (P29, L74). *A human being must die*. The Landlord swears to comply: “*Better for one to die and thousands to be saved!*” But who must it be? The woman who

<sup>17</sup> Words taken from the folksong, lines 4–5 in the Zambelios and Passow version (see Appendix I).

<sup>18</sup> An allusion to Digenis, who in Greek folksongs wrestles with Death on a threshing-floor of iron, marble or stone.

seduced the Master Builder *and prevents him from sleeping at night*, declares the Mother (P30, L75). She must be immured in the foundations of the bridge, that very day before sundown, if further disasters are to be avoided. But the Mother will not declare the victim's identity. That must be revealed by the woman herself or her lover. *And the sacrifice must be a willing one*. With that the Mother departs.

The Master Builder reveals nothing (P31, L77). The Landlord sends a man to summon all the village girls, telling them there is going to be a celebration. <In the libretto the Landlord laughs (!): "Ha, ha, this will be the feast of Death"> He threatens the Master Builder: "If you don't reveal which woman is to blame, I'll set the foundations on your own body".<sup>19</sup> He tells Smaragda to go home, but she insists on staying. The Singer, in despair, asks why.

Intermezzo (P32, L78): the Gipsy women return and form two groups to dance. One group urges the Master Builder to forget woman's love; his mission is not to enjoy life but to build. The other urges the opposite: "All the bridges in the world are worth less than one kiss on the mouth". <In the libretto the first group are village women, the second Gipsies.>

<In the libretto Smaragda sings of her longing for the Master Builder (L80).> The village men return from inspecting the bridge; they are happy to see that the Master Builder can be vanquished by Destiny like everyone else. But the Singer looks ahead to the impending horror: "Oh Sun, what terrible things you will gild this evening with your rays" (P34, L83).

Act II begins (P34, L84). *The village girls arrive in holiday clothes*. <In the libretto they are already present.> The Landlord orders them to reveal the woman's identity, even if it is his own daughter. The Old Man swears that none of them knows; the Landlord must ask the Master Builder (P35, L85). The builders too press him to confess: "A leader is not master of his own life". <In the libretto they say: "of his

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<sup>19</sup> In the libretto he utters the threat *before* dispatching the man to the village, and repeats it after.

own heart”.> But he remains silent. Evening is approaching, time is running out. So the Landlord orders them to seize the Master Builder and immure him in the foundations.

Smaragda can bear it no longer (P37, L87): “Stop, stop! I am his lover!” The Landlord is astounded and the Singer begs her to be silent, but Smaragda insists: she claims she made magic spells to win his love. “I deprived him of his strength and his wits. *The Mother is right! I must be got rid of. [...] It doesn’t matter.* Death is sweet when it’s for someone I love!”

The Landlord reminds them that this is not sufficient; the Mother said the Master Builder was enjoying his lover’s body all night long, whereas, he declares, “My Smaragda is a virgin. [...] Let them take the Master Builder and immure him, since he will not confess.” “Stop!” cries Smaragda, indicating that their relationship was indeed consummated (P38, L89). “*It is my body he enjoys all night long!*”

Her father cannot believe it, and the Master Builder shouts that she is lying. But Smaragda indicates that it is he who is lying in order to save her, and that is proof of his love (P39, L89). *Smaragda reminds her father how often he had asked her why she seemed pale and tired in the mornings. Other women confirm that they have seen the two together.* Smaragda confronts the villagers with contempt. “You’re like dogs baying around the dying hind. Yes, yes, you all saw me. What do I care? I used to thrust my beauty in your face and you hated me for it. Now I thrust my love at you!”

*Her father makes to strike her.* He curses her (P40, L90). She sinks to the ground and tries to seize his hand. The Master Builder comforts her, assuring her of his love: “*Only now do I understand how deeply and fiercely I love you! It was you that I was seeking when I opened up roads, cleaved mountains and seas and bridged rivers.*” And to the villagers: “*We don’t need your permission to enjoy each other’s body all night!*” Smaragda, strengthened, is ready for the sacrifice, *but her father in despair curses the Master Builder and disowns Smaragda.* <At this point, in the libretto, Smaragda’s father relents and embraces her.>

*The builders seize the young woman to lead her away, but she breaks*

*free and runs to her father (P41). They fall into each other's arms and weep. At length they part and Smaragda is led off towards the bridge. Master Builder comforts her (P41, L91). The Singer can only lament the loss of her beauty, the sadness of Hades which awaits her.<sup>20</sup> Discouraged now, she begs for one more day. But the Master Builder comforts her once more: "In one night we have lived a thousand years of their comfortable but worthless lives" (P42).*

The day is ending and the builders have little time left (P43, L91). Smaragda faces the setting sun, which gilds her hair and her arms. She utters a heartrending farewell to the sun (P43, L93). <In the opera, the Master Builder repeats the lines beginning "How I love your hands" from Act I, assuring Smaragda that he will always love her (L94). She replies that she would die for a single kiss for him, that in one night they have lived for a thousand years. They now repeat, with slight variation, the words of the duet "Night is falling once more, my love" from Act I.> *The Singer curses the Master Builder. "What will become of us here, bereft of Smaragda. [...] Oh, Beauty, great martyr, I alone perceive you and mourn for you." Once again she silences him.*

The builders lower her down to the foundations and raise masonry around her, while the Master Builder tries to comfort her (P44, L95). The Singer is in despair. The Master Builder, though still in tears, now takes more decisive control and orders the wall to be built firmly around her (P45, L95). Smaragda's voice is heard, tremulous with fear and pain. <In the opera, she laments her fate, recalling her two sisters who were also sacrificed, and placing a curse on the bridge: "As my heart trembles, so may the bridge tremble; as my hair will fall out, so may travellers fall from the bridge". The builders respond: "Alas for our

<sup>20</sup> Kazantzakis uses imagery from Greek folksong, in which Hades is conceived as a miserable sunless place where all go after death: "In the world below fine, handsome men are like uprooted trees, lithe girls are like knocked-down doors and little children are pale withered apples" (P42: Οι όμορφοι λεβέντες δέντρα 'ναι στον κάτω κόσμο ξεριζωμένα κι οι λυγρές, πόρτες γκρεμισμένες είναι και τα μικρούλικά παιδιά μήλα χλωμά και μαραμένα) Kalomiris preserved this almost word for word, adding the name Smaragda which the Singer repeats several times (L92). Compare, for example, the folksongs in Politis, 1914:219.



labour, alas for our work.” (L96)><sup>21</sup> “*What if the bridge too shakes*”, says a builder, “*the way her poor heart and her voice is shaking?*” Her lover again begs her not to tremble (P45). Her voice is heard once more: “*Don’t speak, my dear, and don’t be afraid. I shall make my heart as strong as iron, that the bridge may be as strong. I shall make my hair as secure as iron, that travellers may be just as secure.*”<sup>22</sup> <The work continues; the bridge is completed, the mist clears and it glows red in the last rays of the setting sun (L97).> The Master Builder calls her name repeatedly, but there is no reply (P46, L98). *All now throw stones on top of her.* The Singer, inconsolable, throws in his broken flute. *The Master Builder himself throws in a mighty rock. The bridge stands firm, gilded by the rays of the setting sun.* The Gipsy women congratulate the Master Builder: “*You have passed through the straits of youth, where Woman [...] lies in wait to kill*” (P47). Others praise Smaragda: “*If only I could find joy in Life and in Death as you did!*” And the builders: “*We are the cranes, the birds who bring and sow in souls, in mountains and plains, the black swallows of the Springtime of the Mind*”. The Master Builder listens sadly. Then he gets up: “*We’ve finished our work here! Let’s go.*” And so they collect their things to move on (P47, L98). *The Gipsy women congratulate him once more and say their farewells.*

<sup>21</sup> The passage added in the libretto is taken directly from the folksong (see Appendix I above), lines 33–38 and line 5.

<sup>22</sup> Both Kazantzakis and Kalomiris use the words of the folksong, lines 42–43 in the version printed above.

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### Editions of the Play and the Opera

As mentioned above (note 5), the text of Kazantzakis' *The Master Builder* (Ο Πρωτομάστορας) quoted here is that of the 1910 edition (Kazantzakis, 1910) published by the journal *Panathineia*, which had included a text of the work in one of its issues. A bilingual edition has been published with a French translation by Dimitri Filias (= Kazantzakis, 1995). The book includes the Greek text, reprinted photographically from the 1910 edition.

The music of Kalomiris' *The Master Builder* was published in a version for piano and voices in 1917, and again in 1940 (though the date on the inside title-page is 1939). In this study we have consulted the second edition (Kalomiris, 1940), which has the text in Greek, French, Italian and German. The libretto (Kalomiris, 1916, 1930) is also available in Greek and English on the extremely informative Manolis Kalomiris Society website ([www.kalomiris.org](http://www.kalomiris.org)), and is printed with English translation in the booklet (Kalomiris, 2003) accompanying the CD described below. Page-references given in this paper are based on the CD booklet.

### Recording on CD

A recording of Kalomiris' opera was made in 1990, sung in Greek by soloists from the Bolshoi Theatre, with the Great Academic Choir of USSR State Radio and Television and with the USSR State Cinema Orchestra, conducted by Emin Khachaturian. It is available on a double CD, Lyra 0056/57, produced by Haris Politopoulos. The CD has been reissued in a new cover, dated 2003, with the libretto in Greek and English parallel texts (= Kalomiris, 2003). Introductory material includes Kalomiris' programme notes from the 1916 and 1929 productions, a note from the producer (all this in Greek and English) and a shorter version of an essay by the musicologist Giorgos Leotsakos (= Leotsakos, 1986) in Greek only.

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